

Fort Sumter National Monument's New Facility at Liberty Square

The August 2001 opening of the long-awaited Fort Sumter Visitor Education Center marked the completion of plans 40 years in the making. For the first time, visitors traveling by concessionaire ferry to Fort Sumter meet park personnel at the point of embarkation. A first-class facility, the building incorporates architectural elements that echo the design of Fort Sumter. Located on a reclaimed "superfund" site on the Cooper River waterfront in Charleston, SC, Liberty Square represents a multi-agency effort to convert a contaminated "brown" coal gasification industrial space into public "green" space. The once abandoned area is now a destination for Charlestonians and tourists alike. The National Park Service building joins the South Carolina Aquarium, an IMAX theater, shopping, restaurants, and various harbor activities that provide educational and recreational opportunities at the water's edge.

A Home for the Garrison Flag

The focal point of the interior exhibits is Major Robert Anderson's U.S. garrison flag. This is the flag that flew over Fort Sumter from December 27, 1860, until the opening bombardment of the Civil War. It was torn in two by high winds on April 11, 1861, just as the country was tearing apart. Saved by Anderson's family, the flag was given to the War Department and eventually turned over to the National Park Service. It has not been on public display in 22 years. After extensive conservation treatment by the National Park Service's Conservation Center at Harpers Ferry, WV, the 33-star flag rests in a specially constructed case, and a 36- by 20-foot full-scale replica hangs above. The original flag is much too fragile to hang. Issues of artifact conservation such as lighting, humidity, and temperature controls had to be resolved before the flag was moved into the new building. The logistics of moving the flag 10 miles from curatorial storage to the exhibit hall were challenging, requiring creative solutions by Fort Sumter's Resource Management staff.

Exhibits on Causes of the Civil War

Not only does the park's facility bring a National Park Service presence into the city, the building offers a great opportunity for expanding Civil War interpretation. The park had already begun a more holistic approach in the early 1990s when staff renovated the 1960s era museum at Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor. Completed in 1995, that museum retains many of the treasured artifacts that were a part of the old museum, but exhibited in fresh surroundings and with a more sweeping and inclusive story line. Blocking out damaging sunlight and providing handicap accessibility were important priorities designed to safeguard artifacts and improve the visitor experience. Another high priority was bringing the exhibit in line with current scholarship. New exhibit text and graphics include an introductory section on the growth of sectionalism, antebellum politics, and the expansion of slavery as the underlying cause of secession and war. But most of the exhibit remains site specific, dealing with topics such as the fort's construction, people and events leading to the firing of the first shot, and what happened to the fort during the Civil War.

An even more ambitious exhibit project began in the fall of 1999 with exhibit planning for the new tour boat facility. In February 2000, park staff met with exhibit designer Krister Olmon from California and National Park Service colleagues Anita T. Smith, the exhibit planner from Harpers Ferry Design Center, staff from the Denver Service Center, and historian Marie Tyler-McGraw of the Washington history office to outline major themes. Tyler-McGraw completed the initial research and writing for content development. Park staff submitted research materials and graphics to designer Olmon which were incorporated in his concept package. Two years later, in February 2002, the exhibits were finally installed. The interim period was filled with five major text revisions and numerous editorial changes, graphic selection and acquisition, and peer review as park staff grappled with sensitive topics in a politically charged atmosphere.

Assigning both a military historian and a social historian to edit and write the text meant that while it would be a cumbersome and at times contentious process, the end product would satisfy diverse interests. The use of language and graphics has been painstakingly examined. Idyllic images of golden rice fields are balanced with those of scarred backs. The haunting photograph of an enslaved body servant armed to fight for the Confederacy, women's voices, and first person quotes help flesh out a multi-layered story.

The final product closely resembles the original outline. Entitled "The First Shot: What Brought the Nation to Civil War at Fort Sumter?," the exhibit contains six sections moving from a broad description of colonial times to the specific site of Fort Sumter in 1861. The panels include "Colonial Roots of the Conflict," "Ambiguities of the Constitution," "Antebellum United States," "Charleston in 1860," "South Carolina Declares its Independence," and "Fort Sumter: Countdown to Conflict."

The introductory text reads,

When the Civil War finally exploded in Charleston Harbor, it was the result of a half-century of growing sectionalism. Escalating crises over property rights, human rights, states rights and constitutional rights divided the country as it expanded westward. Underlying all the economic, social and political rhetoric was the volatile question of slavery. Because its economic life had long depended on enslaved labor, South Carolina was the first state to secede when this way of life was threatened. Confederate forces fired the first shot in South Carolina. The federal government responded with force. Decades of compromise were over. The very nature of the Union was at stake.

The input of Dr. Walter Edgar of the University of South Carolina and Dr. Bernard Powers of the College of Charleston was invaluable. They both reviewed the text and offered insightful suggestions to improve the content. Marie Tyler-McGraw and National Park Service Chief Historian Dr. Dwight Pitcaithley were also instrumental in refining the text. Everyone on the park staff had an opportunity to critique the drafts. As the draft progressed, the project attracted the interest of local politicians who wanted to review the park's Federal viewpoint of the "recent unpleasantness." So far the perception

has passed muster by these politicians. But there are rumblings. There are people who believe that Fort Sumter should be preserved as a shrine to the Confederacy and that the Yankee park presence has desecrated sacred ground. Any talk of slavery as opposed to States rights is perceived as anti-southern. Would our new exhibits skew history to a Yankee perspective? Does a full-size replica of Major Anderson's 33-star garrison flag send that message? A week after the opening in mid-August, a young woman darted into the exhibit hall and took a photograph of the flag. The woman told the ranger on duty: "We will be back to protest the size of that flag." Since September 11th no one has complained about the size of that U.S. flag. But memories are short, and some visitors bring deep-seated belief systems with them. The protesters will be back.

During the months between the time the facility opened and the permanent exhibits were installed, full-scale color prints of each exhibit were hung on temporary plywood frames. This gave visitors a chance to see and comment on the text and graphics prior to its final review. Many comments were received ranging from glowing to condemning. Most were positive, appreciative, and constructive. But there was a blistering letter to the editor of the local newspaper that blasted the "biased political agenda" of the exhibits. The lack of Confederate flags on exhibit caused the writer to urge readers to send letters of protest to Interior Secretary Gale Norton. On the other hand, an elderly black gentleman asked for a copy of the text dealing with the Constitution's treatment of slavery as well as a Library of Congress photograph of an enslaved family. He wanted to take the documents home and show his grandchildren.

The challenges of presenting public history, including multiple and conflicting viewpoints, and of fleshing out military history within a social and political context made the 2 years of exhibit planning an exciting time for park staff. Given the volatile nature of the subject, the exhibits have already engaged the public and promoted lively and healthy discussions.

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